Responsibilities and Rights of Vestrymen in the Protestant Episcopal Church

by

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The Responsibilities and Rights of Vestrymen in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America

(Written for The Evangelical Education Society by the Rt. Rev. Theodore R. Ludlow, D.D.)

WE START with responsibilities because ours is a constitutional church which has provided in its constitution an instrument of government which binds clergy and laity alike. No bishop, no priest, no deacon, and no layman takes office in our church except through a constitutional process, and no one of them exercises authority therein except by that same process. The constitution does not provide the authority, but it does provide how that authority is to be exercised by every member of the Church. If we would always keep that in mind we would have less difficulty with the autocratically inclined, whether they be cardinal bishops or lay popes.

We are of the very life blood of the English Church and of the Church on the continent, but we chose to differ from them in restoring the earlier practice of a shared responsibility in fellowship instead of regarding the exercise of authority as deriving from the top down.

Henry VIII has been criticized for many things, but whatever his character, or lack of it, we owe him a debt of gratitude for preserving to the laity their share in responsibility for the Church's life and work. The hierarchy of the Roman Church had encroached more and more upon the power of kings and of legislators to represent the laity of the Church. By asserting and exercising power as legal lay head of the Church, Henry preserved for the laity their responsible part in the life of the Church.

If it had not been for the stalwart insistence of Bishop White of Pennsylvania, the rights of the laity might have been eclipsed when the American Church was constituted. Bishop Seabury of Connecticut refused to attend or to allow any representatives of the Church in Connecticut to attend the convention called to meet in Christ Church, Philadelphia, on September 27, 1785, because he thought that the Fundamental Principles, drawn up by Bishop White, did not give proper precedence to bishops. Because of his background and training, Bishop Seabury inclined to the monarchical idea of the episcopate, but it is to be noted that he ultimately accepted a place

under the constitution of the American Church. This historic fact should be noted by any who may be tempted to follow in his early ecclesiastical philosophy. We all need to remember and to demonstrate that our Church is a constitutional fellowship where responsibility for the life, governance and progress of the Church rests upon clergy and laity alike,—it is a shared responsibility.

A shared responsibility must have an established instrument providing for a division of powers and responsibilities or there will be misunderstanding and friction. Our constitution is such an instrument, and much friction would be avoided by screening words, customs and practices through the purpose and philosophy of that constitution instead of trying to give expression to words, customs and practices simply because they have been used or expressed in the past or represent the desires of the practitioner.

Origin of a Word

Let's take the word "Vestryman" as an illustration. The word was not defined until the English Canons of 1603. It was then defined as applying to all rate payers (taxpayers) who met annually in the vestry (or robing room) of the parish church to consider the affairs of the parish. In other words, the vestry did not represent all parishioners but only those who paid taxes. These men (and they were only men!) had a two-fold responsibility according to this Canon: temporal and spiritual welfare. Their temporal responsibilities were enumerated as follows: 1) to provide all necessary temporalities, and 2) to prevent profanation of church property and to remove trespassers. Their so-called spiritual responsibilities were primitive in nature: 1) to enforce reverence, 2) to see to it that all parishioners received the Holy Communion at least three times per year, and 3) to present to the Ordinary (the Bishop) for his judgment all parishioners who had their children baptized elsewhere than in the parish church, as well as all "notorious sinners, schismatics, and non-communicating parishioners."

What would happen if we tried to use vestrymen in that way today? How many parishioners could we persuade to serve as vestrymen on that basis? Why? Because it would not express the ideas and life of our Church today. But it represented the ideas and practice of the Church three hundred years ago! True, but it does not represent the ideas of

our Church today. It does not help to build Christian fellowship today.

Just as words change in content and value, so do customs and practices. So, the basis of any practice should not be simply ancient custom but present-day edification as determined by the whole fellowship and not by individual preference of the practitioner. True, the whole fellowship may decide in favor of practices which we personally may consider unwise, but loyal acceptance of the decision of the fellowship is the price we must pay for being part of a fellowship of shared responsibility. Clergy and laity alike are in conscience bound by the fact of a shared responsibility.

Sudden Changes

But suppose I am a vestryman in a parish where changes are being made which, in my experience and judgment, are not in accordance with the accustomed teaching and practice of my parish or of the Church, what am I to do? First ask yourself how the changes have come about. As a result of the express or implied command of the rector? Remember that Canon 45 says: "The control of the worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the Parish, are vested in the Rector; subject to the Rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, the Canons of the Church and the godly counsel of the Bishop." In a Christian fellowship of shared responsibility that canon is not to be interpreted as giving the rector the absolute authority to do as he pleases. His authority is expressly limited by the Prayer Book, the Canons and the Bishop.

Perhaps he is a fairly recent graduate from the seminary where he has had the whole long history of the Church presented to him. In that presentation, he has been particularly attracted to some expression of religious experience which appeals to him and consciously or unconsciously decides that the Church needs a fresh emphasis on that type of experience. One must give patient consideration to recent seminary graduates. For a period of years, they have been under the tutelage of men who are rightly concerned with the presentation of the whole long life of the Church and who do not always have the time or the opportunity of daily association with the Church as it is today. Moreover, at the present time, the graduate leaves the seminary in a period of world upheaval when nations, organizations and individuals are engaged in a frantic hunt for security. In such an atmosphere, the ancient ways frequently

seem best. They seem secure and there is a natural human desire to return to them.

This tendency of human nature is early portrayed for us in the Bible in the words of the Israelites as they faced the dangers and uncertainties of the desert: "We remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlick." "Up, make us gods which shall go before us." They were saying in effect: Let us return to the old ways of Egypt, for at least they were secure! We catch a glimpse of the same human tendency in Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration: "Lord, it is good for us to be here, if Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles: one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias." But tabernacles were out of place when there was a demoniac boy at the foot of the mountain who needed to be healed. So it is with us. We are under Christ's command to win a world. That which is winsome and edifying to that end today is good and must be the basis of judgment rather than simply antiquity or former use. But it frequently takes some maturity of experience to learn that fact.

Ask Questions

We have dwelt somewhat upon this because of the day in which we live. Hasty and resentful action always brings more trouble and unhappiness. The remedy for an unsatisfactory situation is never found in whispering the dissatisfaction to other parishioners, but in going frankly and respectfully to the rector and asking, "Why do we do thus and so?" Or, better yet, discuss the matter quietly with your fellow vestrymen and, if they are of the same mind, have them as a body, or through a chosen spokesman, ask the rector the same question. The rector will welcome the question, for honest questions are always a teaching opportunity and it is a vestryman's right to know the reason for an action or a policy which concerns the well-being of the fellowship for which he shares responsibility. In addition, it will be wise and helpful for the vestrymen to do some studying and reading on their own account, so that they may know what the Prayer Book and the Canons say and may receive intelligently the answer which the rector gives. Attendance upon lay study groups and conferences is a necessity because being a vestryman is not just a job for Sunday and monthly vestry meetings, but for all the year.

If the rector's answer does not seem wise or satisfactory to the vestryman, they should respectfully say so to the rector and be at pains to give a reason for their judgment. In a church of shared responsibility, it is their right to do so, nay, it is their duty to do so because of the shared responsibility. This does not have to be done in any hostile or belligerent tone but simply as fellow laborers sharing a common responsibility and seeking the most effective way of discharging that responsibility. If through laziness or timidity the vestrymen fail to make known their disagreement, they endanger the church with clericalism. Premature resignation is an evasion of responsibility, not a facing up to it. If after patient local consultation there is still serious disagreement, then, as a last resort, the matter may respectfully be brought to the bishop for his godly consideration and admonition. Because of the authority and responsibility vested in him by the church we should be reasonably willing to accept and to obey his judgment. If we cannot conscientiously accept his judgment, then quiet resignations may be presented. We are still a fellowship with many conscientious differences of opinion and that fact must be respected.

Too many times, the responsibility of vestrymen is mistakenly believed to be the carrying out of what the clergyman wants and raising the money to pay the cost of it. The New Testament pictures the laymen as sharing in the same responsibility as the clergy. I Peter 2:9: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." Acts 11:22-29, laymen founded the Church in Antioch and an ordained man, St. Barnabas, complemented their work when he arrived in Antioch. The neglect of lay responsibility leads to clericalism and a sense of professional exclusiveness on the part of the clergy. We can see the effects of this kind of timidity or neglect if we turn to political life and see what happens when we leave politics "to those who are interested."

Fond of Power

The leaders of our constitutional convention in 1787 were aware of the evil effects of this human tendency in a democracy as shown by a comment made at that time. Robert Morris said: "The mind of man is fond of power. Increase his prospects and you enlarge his desires." Many of the same men who drew up our national Constitution also drew up the Constitution of our Church. They had a strong sense

of the wisdom of a shared responsibility in preserving and advancing the well-being of a fellowship.

The responsibility of Christian people is fixed at Baptism and recognized at Confirmation and is the same for all people. The later division into clergy and laity is a Christ ordained division of labor for the good ordering of the task of serving the Kingdom of God but it is not a difference of responsibility. The laity share with the clergy in the whole purpose of God as it is worked out through the Church. The constitution of our Church gives expression to that shared responsibility when it provides that no man can become a deacon, priest, or bishop except by a process which at every step requires the consent and approval of a designated body of laymen. In the presence of this shared and sacred responsibility, many laymen need to ask themselves a soul-searching question: "What have I done to get the right kind of men into the ministry?"

Scholarly research as well as ecclesiastical experience are restoring the coordinate responsibility of clergy and laity in the life and work of the Church. The Liturgical Movement has rediscovered for us the fact that actual participation of both laity and clergy is essential to the valid celebration of the Holy Communion. The practical experience of the Churches in recognizing the responsibility shared with laymen was expressed by a Churchman, Mr. Charles P. Taft, when he accepted the presidency of the then Federal Council of Churches at Seattle on December 6, 1946. He said: "I can welcome this important and significant departure from precedent, in electing a layman president of the Federal Council, as a recognition, in no sense personal, of the obvious fact that the men and women of the congregations, 'the blessed company of all faithful people,' make the Christian Church . . . The world cries for the effective and universal Christian ministry of all believers."

Shared Responsibility

We can sum up what we have tried to say by stating that vestrymen and laymen have a shared responsibility with the clergy for the whole work and well-being of the Church. This fact creates still other responsibilities: to really know the whole task and life of the Church, to know the constituency they represent, and to work and sacrifice for the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth. This means that they must grow more effective for their task by

regular and faithful study, prayer and Communion. They must fearlessly set the right kind of Christian example in their shared responsibility that the world can see them working hand in hand with the clergy in the service of the Kingdom.

Rights? They spring out of the responsibilities we have mentioned. Vestrymen have the right to speak for, to defend, to protect, and to serve every such responsibility without fear or favor. The more effort they put into discharging their responsibilities, the less effort they will have to (or will want to) put into maintaining their rights. They will find another One sharing in their shared responsibility and His grace is sufficient.